

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: "FORGING AN IDENTITY":
THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN
JEWISH MUSEUMS

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Museums reflect the way a society looks at the past, but upon closer examination this reflection is bidirectional; museums are shaped by our current social norms and culture as much as built on our past. From their inception, museums have refined the public's understanding of the world around them. Through an analysis of six Jewish museums and their portrayal of Jewish women, it will become clear how museums are a reflection of society.

“FORGING AN IDENTITY”:
THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN JEWISH MUSEUMS

By

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List of Museums

- “The Core Exhibition.” The Museum of Jewish Heritage— A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. 36 Battery Place, New York, NY 10280. 5 January 2014.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Thesis and Outline

Museums reflect the way a society looks at the past, but upon closer examination this reflection is bidirectional; museums are shaped by our current social norms and culture as much as built on our past. From their inception, museums have refined the public's understanding of the world around them. Although there have been changes over time in the way museums engage their visitors, there's a consistent drive to spark and foster an interest in learning and thereby educate the public about a by-gone era. Jewish museums are no different. With changes in society, such as views regarding minorities, museums also change the viewpoints presented in the exhibits. The way our society views women has had a huge impact on the way museums curate exhibits. A person's identity is the way in which people internalize how other people view them. Personal identity is heavily influenced by society and its views on topics such as gender, culture, and religion. Motivated by a sense of self, a person gravitates toward learning about his or her own identity. By portraying women as an integral part of society, museums can educate and help people refine and shape their own sense of self. Too often, however, this reinforcement and shaping of identity is offered only to men. Our society today believes that it is key to enlighten and educate boys and men regarding gender equality. It is also important to inspire girls and women to build upon and contribute to society. Museums large and small are

constantly changing and evolving the way they present their message and educate the public. For a museum's agenda to be successful, it must be agile and dynamic.

For a museum to be effective at educating visitors on a topic, it must, at minimum, accomplish two things: it must offer a didactic analysis and it must engage its intended audience on a personal level. An efficient way for a Jewish museum to do this is to include the role of Jewish women in its exhibits. As society changes its views and opinions, a successful museum must update its collection to represent society's current values and beliefs. Jewish museums make every effort to engage their visitors on a personal level, but all too often it is from a Jewish androcentric viewpoint. Women have always been a part of Jewish history, but until recently their experiences have been generally seen as insignificant and not included as part of the overall discussion. In today's world, however, women are an integral part of society. In the past, women were not seen as visual contributors to historic events. Women are a central part of Jewish history and without including their narrative, a museum is missing a valuable opportunity to educate society through a more complete portrayal of history.

Defining a Museum

What constitutes a museum is difficult to define. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a museum is “a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited.”¹ This very basic definition only scratches the surface of the museum and its purpose. Museums are a place to learn, expand, and analyze facts and how those facts apply to a person and their place in

¹ Oxford Dictionaries, "*Museum*". *Oxford Dictionaries*.

society. To conflate things further, there are also many different types of museums. Elaine Heumann Gurian breaks down the different types of museums into five groups: “object-centered, narrative, client-centered, community, and national.” The “object-centered” museum is one that is focused on the artifacts it owns or borrows. This definition is mainly applied to art museums. These types of museums have been negatively critiqued for being too focused on the objects rather than the story the object tells. Where these museums fail, “narrative” museums pick up and succeed. These types of museums are based on telling the story of the objects on display. In these exhibits, objects “serve primarily as evidence.” The main criticism of these museums, however, is that the curators create a bias and therefore the information presented lacks a sense of impartiality. Most “narrative” museums are historical (such as the case of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), but these museums can also be natural history or art museums. “Client-centered” museums are focused primarily on their target audience, which are often families and children. These are mainly children’s museums and science centers. Many critics argue that these museums are more playgrounds than centers of learning and are too narrow in their mission. Similarly, “Community” museums are focused on how the community will benefit from their existence. The main distinction from “client-centered” museums is that the “Community” museum attempts to reach a wider audience. The mission of this type of museum is to help express the pride of a community. Many of these do not resemble your typical museum since they are usually placed in buildings with a dual purpose, such as a community center.² For example, many synagogues have

² Elaine Heumann Gurian, "Choosing among the Options: An Opinion about

locally donated objects on display to show pride in their community. Lastly, the “national” museum is one created and heavily controlled by people outside the museum world, such as politicians. These government-sponsored museums are focused first and foremost on presenting a favorable representation of the nation.³ The Smithsonian museums are a prime example of the “national” museum. In general, though, these categories are only a cognitive framework. A given museum rarely falls into only one of these groups and instead straddles the border between two or more types to take advantage of their strengths and diminish their individual weaknesses. These classifications provide a frame of reference for understanding how museums reflect society.

Background on Jewish Museums

Jewish museums fall into many of these categories. This type of museum initially became a phenomenon during the late nineteenth century. The first public exhibit dedicated solely to Jewish objects was at the International World Fair in Paris in 1897. Isaac Strauss, who was famous for his music, supplied all the objects for the display. This is an important point in the progression of Jewish museums because it was the first time that Jewish artifacts were displayed outside of a religious framework. The goal was to focus on the objects as works of art rather than their

Museum Definitions," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 45, no. 2 (2002), 75.

³ Gurian, "Choosing among the Options: An Opinion about Museum Definitions," 75.

significance to ritual in Judaism.⁴ This exhibit succeeded at its goal to show that Jewish objects had meaning outside the world of religion.

This need to show Jews as more than just a religious group was a key motivation for the creation of Jewish museums. During the late nineteenth century, Jews all over Europe were trying to gain emancipation and were looking for acceptance as equal citizens. Public museums in Europe began to accept donations of Jewish objects. For example, the Strauss family donated their collection of Jewish objects to the Musee de Cluny in 1889. This trend in donations helped create museums and exhibits that focused on Jews. Through donations, especially from larger collectors, the first Jewish Museum in Berlin was founded in 1933.⁵ The world began to see that Jewish objects could be major contributions to the worlds of art and history; ritual objects could be appreciated outside of ceremonies and tradition.

In the United States, the motivation for the creation of Jewish museums was slightly different. Cyrus Adler, a leader in the Conservative movement in American Judaism, wanted to display Jewish artifacts to all types of Americans. He believed that objects are tools to explain and exemplify ideas. This means that the object on display and its label are key to help the visitor truly understand how that artifact applies to the exhibit. In this way, Adler “demystified artifacts by diffusing their aura as heirlooms while textualizing them.”⁶ Instead of treating objects like antiques (which is how his counterparts in Europe viewed them), Adler wanted people to

⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 83.

⁵ David Clark, "Jewish Museums: From Jewish Icons to Jewish Narratives," *European Judaism* 36, no. 2 (10, 2003) 5.

⁶ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* 89.

experience them. By bringing the object down from a pedestal, the visitor is able to better contextualize and understand how this object plays a role in the exhibit and society as a whole.

Adler was focused on educating people about Judaism, the religion. Through his work with the Smithsonian he helped showcase Jews within the larger context of Western civilization. By creating an exhibit that showed the unity of the Jewish religion, Adler hoped that people would see Judaism as a key part of world religions.⁷ Jews around the world wanted to show how their culture and history could be included in the museum world.

⁷ Clark, "Jewish Museums: From Jewish Icons to Jewish Narratives," 6; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 95.

Chapter 2: Relevant Scholarship

Feminist Theory in the Museum

Since museums have a large influence on how society views the past, present, and future, the curators and staff are always conscious of the exhibits and the messages they portray. As such, museums and their exhibits reflect society and its changing views. One of the biggest changes in our society is the view that men and women are equals. Feminism and Women's Studies have become key factors in understanding the past. Feminist theory is a major social force aimed to reform museums today. Understanding how to better represent gender throughout history is a concern for many museums. Hilde Hein discusses how museums approach feminist theory in her essay "Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective." She believes that museums, as well as feminism, both have the same goal in mind: to show differences within a set of contexts without favoring one side in order to help people better understand the world.⁸ Two of the main tools that Hein proposes curators should use to further this goal are objects and language. Hein argues that both museums and feminism want to help people understand all the nuanced differences of our world, past, present, and future.

In order for feminism to be used as an influence on museums, each institution

⁸ Hilde Hein, "Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective," in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Amy K. Levin (New York: Routledge, 2010) 57.

and their overall mission need to employ some new tactics when reconfiguring their exhibits and their image. Mainly museums must bring the minorities, such as women, into the forefront of exhibits. Not only must they focus on the neglected, but museums must also portray *why* these groups have been neglected. Hein proposes accomplishing this through the use of objects and language. Understanding the impact of an object as well as the words used to describe the object is key. Hein believes that “museums should abandon language that is falsely genderless to represent the ideal museum visitor...”⁹ Rather than trying to make everything gender neutral and attempting to obtain some sense of universality, museums should embrace what makes their exhibits unique.

Many museums try to convince the visitor that the museum curators know for certain the correct interpretation of interwoven facts and objects. Instead, according to Hein, museums should represent themselves as distributors/disseminators of knowledge who let the visitor come to their own conclusions.¹⁰ Museums, according to Hein, should not see themselves as the authority or the experts. Instead, museums need to see themselves like libraries: they give out the knowledge to the general public with diverse opinions, letting the visitor form their own beliefs and opinions. Through challenging the status quo, Hein is getting at a kernel of truth: not only is it more accurate to include a female perspective, but it is also more effective at generating an audience. Hein’s essay is important because she gives a basis for understanding how feminist theory views itself within the context of the museum. By gaining background on how feminist museum scholars see women in the context of

⁹ Hilde Hein, "Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective," 58.

¹⁰ Hilde Hein, "Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective," 59.

an exhibit, it is easier to analyze the portrayal of women in Jewish museums.

The key way in which museums can help visitors form their own opinions is through the way they display objects. Currently most museums give an overview of history by highlighting major events. However, by giving the visitor highlights of the past, “we [as visitors] are unable to imagine or understand the gradual process leading up to the climax.”¹¹ When curators present an exhibit that glosses over history, the visitor suffers. Rather than just showing the history that trumpets mankind as a race of exalted beings, museums need to show the visitor its dark underbelly as well in order to help the public better appreciate the world we live in today. One of the main ways museums can become an accurate reflection of society is through the portrayal of women.

According to Hein, curators need to apply feminist theory to their institutions in order to survive. At first one might think that she is suggesting, by implying that museums must apply feminist theory that all museums need to become gender-neutral institutions that show how the past was oppressive. This could not be further from the truth. Curators need to take a new approach at understanding the museum as an institution. Rather than distilling factoids in biased nuggets that happen to be more manageable, museums and their staff should encourage a multiplicity of truths and conflicts. Curators should cast new meaning into the mundane, giving all the information, or lack of information, to the visitors to wrestle with for themselves. This is a somewhat lofty proposition by Hein; to think that museums will let go of the reins and let visitors roam free to come to their own conclusions is something that

¹¹ Hilde Hein, "Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective," 59.

may never happen. If museums challenge themselves and their visitors to look at history from more than one viewpoint, progress can be made. By improving the way museums present their subject; they can become more reflective of the modern diverse society.

Another scholar who studies women and their portrayal in museums takes a different approach to explain how to incorporate women and create a more diverse museum experience. Barbra Clark Smith explains in her essay “A Women’s Audience: Applied Feminist Theories” how, in her opinion, feminist theories should be applied in museums. She agrees with Hilde Hein that museum curators have their own agenda in mind and try to convince visitors of their version of the truth rather than showing them all the facts. The three places in which Smith believes that museums can apply feminist theory are through “the audience we [as museums] address, the artifacts we [as museums] interpret, and the subjects we [as museums] choose to teach.”¹² In order to create better museums, Smith suggests that museums should embrace feminist theory.

Smith begins her essay by tackling how museums need to change the way they view their visitors. In the past, the public has been erroneously supposed by museums to be exclusively male. This notion of the public as male is a “historical construct” that assumes that no matter the time or place, men are the majority and therefore must be the focus in order to gain the attention of the audience.¹³ Although today most people view the broad public as both male and female, men are still seen

¹² Barbara Clark Smith, "A Woman's Audience: A Case of Applied Feminist Theory," in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Amy K. Levin (New York: Routledge, 2010) 65.

¹³ Smith, "A Woman's Audience: A Case of Applied Feminist Theory," 66.

as the dominant force. Rather than trying to aim for the mainstream of the public audience, Smith argues that museums should focus on “the perspectives of women, people of color, working people, or lesbians and gays.”¹⁴ Rather than trying to reach a general audience by thinking about them as white, male, middle class, heterosexuals, museums need to understand how to reach out to minority groups. By taking this new approach, museums can not only help their minority visitors, but they can also help their male audience garner an even deeper understanding by refusing to play into assumptions they might already hold. This approach, according to Smith, will help all visitors re-evaluate the information they are given and be able to have an overall better experience.

Smith continues by explaining how museums need to change the way they deal with their objects/artifacts. The main problem is how objects are displayed in exhibits. Artifacts are often put on display with labels describing the object and its context. Although many curators would rather have “objects speak for themselves”, Smith understands that it is important to contextualize and give meaning to these artifacts for the visitors. With a feminist framework in mind, curators must reevaluate the way in which these artifacts are labeled. Language again is the crux of both Smith’s and Hein’s argument. Smith believes that museums must “remove sexism from labeling...”¹⁵ This means, for example, that when identifying a woman’s portrait curators would identifier her by her name and not her relation to her husband (Abigail Adams versus Mrs. John Adams). Small changes such as these can pay big dividends for a museum to have a large impact on society.

¹⁴ Smith, "A Woman's Audience: A Case of Applied Feminist Theory," 67.

¹⁵ Smith, "A Woman's Audience: A Case of Applied Feminist Theory," 68.

Smith concludes by positing what subjects museums should deal with in their exhibits. Although special exhibits about women are important, there are better ways to integrate women into the permanent sections of a museum. Smith suggests that instead of curators adding more about women to their existing exhibits, museums need to do a mass overhaul.¹⁶ Most museum exhibits have not had major updates since their inception. A complete overhaul of all exhibits is a resource intensive undertaking. The amount of money and time necessary to completely redesign all exhibits would be prohibitive for most museums to accomplish all at once. Including women is important, however, and incorporating them into exhibits in whatever way possible will help museums meet the need to reflect society. Both museum staff and feminist scholars must let go of an all-or-nothing mentality, reject a proverbial tug of war, and embrace small steps forward. Through small changes, the visitor will gain a better sense of what it meant to be a woman in the past.

Both Hilde Hein and Barbra Clark Smith ask how museums can bring in feminist viewpoints into exhibits. They give museums practical ways to change their exhibits and incorporate feminist theory. This idea that museums need to frame their exhibits to include women is key to a museum becoming an institution that will stand the test of time. Jewish museums also need to make room for the role of women in order to become true reflections of today's society. Most scholarship on Jewish museums, however, does not analyze the way in which women should be included in exhibits.

¹⁶ Smith, "A Woman's Audience: A Case of Applied Feminist Theory," 69.

Scholarship on Jewish Museums

The scholarship currently on Jewish museums focuses on either the museum and its impact on Jewish history or the Holocaust and its representation in the museum. Jenna Weissman Joselit discusses how the Jewish museum has become a central part of the Jewish community in her essay “ Best-in Show: American Jews, Museum Exhibitions, and the Search for Community.” Joselit argues that the Jewish museum has become a central institution for Jews in America. Her thesis states “contemporary Jewish museums represent an alternative, yet equally viable, way for modern-day American Jew to belong to something larger than themselves.”¹⁷ Jewish museums have become a way for Jews to connect to their heritage and their past. They are a way for Jews to reflect on themselves and the Jewish community as a whole. The essay begins with a discussion about how American Jews wanted to be able to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the late nineteenth century. Starting with a petition, Jews were able to force the Metropolitan Museum of Art to open on Sundays. Joselit uses this story to show how Jews in America have always had an interest in museums.

After establishing the precedent that Jews in America are interested in museums, Joselit discusses the creation of The Jewish Museum in New York City. Joselit makes the point that “its history is a testament to how American Jewry

¹⁷ Jenna Weissman Joselit, "Best-in-show: American Jews, Museum Exhibitions, and the Search for Community," in *Imagining the American Jewish Community*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2007)142.

increasingly made the museum its own.”¹⁸ The Jewish Museum and the history of the building is key to any understanding of Jewish museums in America today. At its inception The Jewish Museum was meant to be a place where scholars from the Jewish Theological Seminary came to do research. This all changed in 1947 when the museum moved to its current location. The Jewish Museum today is all about art. The change in subject matter was probably due to its close proximity to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This progression shows how museums change over time and adapt based on their audience and location. It is important to contemplate this precedent of being capable of subject change. Just as society and its views change, so does the museum.

The rest of Joselit’s essay is about the Jewish Museum and its many exhibits. These exhibits, according to Joselit, are important because they engaged with American Jews on new levels. One of the museum’s most controversial exhibits was called “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art.” This exhibit, which debuted in 2002, showcased art, in many different mediums. The art had the visitor question the relationship between today’s culture and the Holocaust. On display was everything from a concentration camp constructed out of Legos to a large photograph of prisoners at Buchenwald with the artist inserted into the photo holding a can of Diet Coke.¹⁹ This display prompted a lot of backlash, from both critics and the public.

¹⁸ Joselit, "Best-in-show: American Jews, Museum Exhibitions, and the Search for Community," 146.

¹⁹ Kleeblatt, Norman L., Jewish Museum (New York, N.Y.), *Mirroring Evil : Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (New York; New Brunswick, N.J.: Jewish Museum; Rutgers University Press, 2001).

People even picketed outside the museum to protest.²⁰ What is key to all of the controversy surrounding this one exhibit is that it shows how important the museum is to the American Jewish community. American Jews see the institution of the Jewish museum as an establishment that shows them the importance of Jewish culture and their pride in their past. Joselit explains how the Jewish museum has become a key place for Jews in America to understand and connect to their Judaism, both as a culture and as a religion. Jewish museums have become an important mechanism to represent Jewish society to the world as well as the community itself.

Feminism in Israeli Museums

In order to understand what role women should play in Jewish museums scholars who focus on women's studies have explored women and their role in the museum. However, their work is mainly focused on museums in Israel. One example of this is the controversy on an image in the Diaspora Museum (known in Hebrew as Beit Hatfutsot). The museum opened in 1978 with the mission to show the story of the Jewish people, from their Biblical beginnings into the future.²¹ However, when Dafna Izraeli, a sociologist and professor at Bar-Ilan University, visited the museum she had a very different experience. She explains in her article "They Have Eyes and See Not': Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum" that the museum shows male

²⁰ Ron Rosenbaum, "Honoring a Picket Line at the Jewish Museum," *New York Observer*, April 1, 2002.

²¹ "Beit Hatfutsot - Museum of the Jewish People - Beit Hatfutsot," <http://www.bh.org.il/about-us.aspx> (accessed 2/15/2014, 2014).

supremacy and the marginalization of women as part of Jewish life.²² The article begins with explaining how important museums are to the construction of culture. Academic scholars understand that culture is something constructed by society. Izraeli makes a key point that “Museums are locales in which the manufacturing process is implemented.”²³ This means that a museum shapes the way our society understands not only its history, but also the way it lives today. Through the exhibits and the narrative there is a constructed notion of how society should view that subject. In this case, Izraeli is arguing that the Diaspora Museum reinforces themes of male superiority in Jewish history.

Izraeli outlines further in the next section how she will go about explaining the issues of the main exhibit in the Diaspora Museum. She argues that gender is used in the museum to portray Jewish life as androcentric. Rather than showing a true history of the Jewish people, the museum removes women from the conversation entirely.²⁴ Izraeli wants to prove to the reader that the museum is misrepresenting Jewish history. Rather than being a reflection of society, the museum staff and curators are advocating their own agenda.

In the review of the museum, Izraeli focuses on one section within the museum’s core exhibit: “The Family Gate.” “The Family Gate” begins with a display of portraits on a wall. These six portraits of three men and three women are interesting not because of their subject matter but the way the curators decided to

²² Izraeli, “‘They have Eyes and See Not’: Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum,” 515.

²³ Izraeli, “‘They have Eyes and See Not’: Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum,” 516.

²⁴ Izraeli, “‘They have Eyes and See Not’: Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum,” 517.

explain these works of art. Each portrait has a caption that identifies the subject in the portrait. What Izraeli points out is that while the men are all identified by their name, the women are given no such identification. Rather, the women are put into classifications. Women are seen through gendered stereotypes such as brides and wives. This classification is based on their relationship to men. This notion of gender roles happens in another display of portraits later in the exhibit.²⁵ Although there may not be much to know about the women in these artworks, it doesn't mean that the museum should ignore their captions entirely. By just providing the main information to the visitor, the museum is reinforcing the notion that women were invisible in the past. The museum is setting the visitor up to fail in the goal of fully understanding the past and the subject presented. Their agenda of male superiority is in contrast to the direction of their mission statement, which states that the story of the Jewish people is told throughout the exhibits. By excluding women the museum leaves out half of the story of the Jewish people.

Izraeli not only comments on the exhibit, but also how guides present the exhibit to the visitor. While in "The Family Gate," Izraeli overhears a tour guide explaining the life cycle events of Jews. The guide states that the life cycle begins with circumcision of a baby. However, Izraeli points out in her essay that Jewish girls are not circumcised; rather, many are given a small blessing or naming ritual. Sadly the guide does not explain this to the tour group, nor do any of the visitors question this statement. It bothers Izraeli that the tour guide and the visitors go along with the notion that women are not part of Jewish ritual life. This experience leads Izraeli to

²⁵ Izraeli, "'They have Eyes and See Not': Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum," 517-8.

ask another guide, a woman, why there are so few women in the displays. The guide answers that women are not circumcised and do not have a bar mitzvah. According to Izraeli, "It did not occur to her that things could be otherwise."²⁶ The museum and its exhibit are reinforcing the idea that women have no significant place in Jewish ritual or family life.

There are times when the museum clearly could have included women in the exhibit but chose to exclude them instead. Izraeli gives an example of this when discussing the demonstration of the marriage ceremony. There is a life-sized sculpture on display that portrays the moment in the ceremony when the bride, her mother, and the groom's mother circle around the groom seven times. Izraeli notes this is an exclusively Ashkenazi custom. It seems that in this scene "the women are united in a ritual of worship of a man."²⁷ It was a conscious decision by the museum curators to portray the part of the Ashkenazi ceremony that showed women in a subservient position. The museum could have instead shown other parts of the wedding ceremony, such as the sharing of the Kiddush, to show women as active participants in Judaism. Deciding what to display or not display greatly impacts the message the visitor receives when viewing the exhibit.

What Izraeli finds the most interesting part of the exhibit is located in the display on holidays. The section on the Day of Atonement, also known as Yom Kippur, caught her eye. This separate section included a modification of a painting by Maurycy Gotlieb. Entitled "Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur," the

²⁶ Izraeli, "'They have Eyes and See Not': Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum," 519.

²⁷ Izraeli, "'They have Eyes and See Not': Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum," 519.

image shows the synagogue and the worshipers on this holy day. In the original work, a group of women sit in the balcony behind the men. However the picture hanging up in this display showed no women; instead, a chandelier lights up the room. Izraeli knows that the original contains women since it is on display at the Tel Aviv Museum. Just as with the rest of the museum, the women were removed from history.²⁸ It seems that rather than trying to tell the story of how the Jewish people lived throughout the centuries, the Diaspora Museum has a specific agenda to tell the story of how Jewish men lived in the past. By pushing this agenda, the museum is doing a disservice to itself and its visitors. The museum failed to promote and inspire Jews to understand and embrace their identity.

The end of the article consists of Izraeli's conclusions about the Diaspora Museum and its message. In the past, women were marginalized for their role in history. However, this is no excuse for the museum to continue to marginalize women in their presentation of Jewish history. A museum that claims to represent the story of the Jewish people in reality makes women invisible and bolsters the argument that men are superior to women.²⁹ The museum is supposed to help shape society's ideas about the past and the culture today; instead it is reinforcing notions of androcentrism.

Another Israeli feminist scholar has written on this issue at the Diaspora Museum more recently. Pnina Lahav outlines what happened after Izraeli published her article. Although Izraeli talks about many issues with the Diaspora Museum, Lahav focuses on the controversy over the Gottlieb painting. According to the article,

²⁸ Izraeli, "'They have Eyes and See Not': Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum," 520.

²⁹ Izraeli, "'They have Eyes and See Not': Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum," 521.

the museum did try to explain the reasoning behind removing the women from the painting. The museum's first response was that when the museum was being planned and built, around the 1970s, they were unaware of "theories concerning women's equality" and therefore they should not be chastised for taking a traditional approach to Jewish history.³⁰ This response is supporting the notion that women were totally erased from history before second wave feminism in the 1970s. Staff and curators may think that they do not have to change due to the time they were built. By failing to change the exhibit, the Diaspora Museum failed to represent society.

However, Lahav explains four reasons why the argument that feminism was not a concern to society at the time is invalid. First, she talks about how the founders of Israel were in favor of gender equality. There are multiple examples of how Israel is a society that believes in equality for both men and women. For example, Israel's Declaration of Independence pledged equal status to men and women. The military service laws in Israel also understood ideas about gender equality since both men and women are drafted. The fact that gender equality is a key part of Israeli society shows that the museum staff was aware of gender equality even before it was part of the worldwide feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Claiming that the museum and its staff were unaware of ideas about gender equality is disingenuous. Second, Lahav talks about the museum's actions. The fact that the museum actively decided to remove the women from the picture shows that they knowingly ignored any ideas

³⁰ Pnina Lahav, "A Chandelier for Women: A Tale about the Diaspora Museum and Maurycy Gottlieb's "Day of Atonement"—Jews Praying on Yom Kippur," *Israel Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring, 2006) 113.

about gender equality in history.³¹ The museum actively decided to use a reproduction without the women and therefore it cannot be considered an oversight. It required deliberate action on the part of the museum to have the women removed. They were embarrassed and no one could admit to making this decision and take full responsibility. Not only must a museum be willing to change, but they must also admit their mistakes. Learning from the high and low points of the past is something that all museums portray in their exhibits. This reluctance to include a female perspective is a curious one; a feminine point of view can only help increase efficacy.

Dealing with the Holocaust

When discussing Jewish museums, most of the scholarship uses Holocaust museums and memorials as sources. This Holocaust scholarship discusses how Jews are represented through different mediums and how that representation impacts society's view of this tragedy. One of the most famous scholars on this subject is James Young. In a recent article, Young deals with how women are presented in Holocaust museums and memorials. He argues that when women are brought into the discussion, their experiences are minimized. Young states that, "We may hold the pain of women in high regard, but when we regard it, we also find spectacle in it, converting their suffering into cultural, even psychological, objects around which we tell our own stories, find large meanings, fixed and full of symbolic portent."³²

³¹ Lahav, "A Chandelier for Women: A Tale about the Diaspora Museum and Maurycy Gottlieb's "Day of Atonement"—Jews Praying on Yom Kippur," 114.

³² James E. Young, "Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory," *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (2009), 1778.

According to Young, Holocaust survivors are stripped of their personal stories as they become made for the masses. In an exhibit, the visitor needs to decide if they are seeing a woman's story or just a reflection of that story that has been turned into a symbol.

In order to understand how women are viewed in exhibits, Young goes to historical sources to prove how women's experiences are marginalized. He gives a basis for how women were treated during the Holocaust. Using Nazi sources, Young shows that women were considered to be special targets since they were the source of the Jewish people. The fact that women were treated differently is a key point to Young's argument. Unlike men, women were sexually abused and this made their experience very distinct. According to the article, there seems to be no framework for helping a woman express her experiences.³³ Young makes the point that for men, there is a body of shared experience to draw upon in our collective consciousness and women do not have the same wealth of resources. The Holocaust was a unique and unprecedented event. Nonetheless, women have no way of being able to frame their experiences from this tragedy. It is very hard to get a full sense of the Holocaust and its impact on society when the full story, of both men and women, cannot be presented.

Although there are a lot of stories of women in the Holocaust, often-significant information and true understanding is missing from them. Young gives examples of women who have told their stories. The prime example of Anne Frank is one that Young focuses on extensively. He talks about how her diary was stripped of

³³ Young, "Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory," 1780.

any sexual tones by Otto Frank before it was published. Through this process, Anne Frank became “the ideal of the presexual child as innocent victim, an image meant to stand in for the innocence of all Jewish victims.”³⁴ Rather than showing Anne as a girl, the edits to her diary have made her a symbol for all Holocaust victims. This model shows how women and their stories are used as tools for an agenda rather than embracing them as an individual identity in a larger society.

Using women as a symbol for all victims is not limited to their stories. Young gives an example of how photography can also strip a woman’s voice from her story. There is a famous group of photos that show women being attacked by SS officers. Young focuses on a photo that shows a group of women who were forced to disrobe and paraded to a shooting pit outside of Leipaja, Latvia in December of 1941. This image raises issues about the sexuality of both the victims and their killers.³⁵ Artists have used this image to convey messages about gender and sexuality. Understanding how artists view women of the past gives insight about what role women and their stories play in museum exhibits.

Young gives the example of a display at Yad Vashem where this issue of women and sexuality in photography was raised. There is a fine line between seeing a woman’s body as art and a woman’s body as a sexual object. When visitors entered the historical galleries, they came face to face with a wall-sized photograph depicting the Jewish women of Liepaja stripped naked, shivering in fear, staring back at the German photographer’s lens as he snapped their picture moments before his cohorts

³⁴ Young, "Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory," 1781.

³⁵ Young, "Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory," 1781.

shot them dead. There was backlash from the Ultra-Orthodox community, who insisted that the image be removed. They believed that to show the humiliation and degradation of these women made the museum complicit in perpetuating the crimes against these women. The museum responded that they would not take the photographs down because this debasement of women was just as much of a reality of the Holocaust as anything else in the museum. When showing these pieces of art, museums walk the fine line between documenting history and debasing the victims.³⁶ Understanding how to walk this line is key to beginning to create this framework of making women's voices heard not just in Holocaust museums, but in museums of all types.

The stance taken by Young is an example of a museum using gender as a tool to both educate their intended audience and to relate to them on a deep personal level. Museums are established to give our society a better understanding of our past, present, and future. When one thinks of a museum exhibit it is unlikely that gender is on the forefront of the mind. Gender is just one factor in how society views the past. By including it in the overall framework, museums become a clear reflection of society.

³⁶ Young, "Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory," 1783.

Chapter 3: Museum Analysis

Introduction

Women have become more prominent in museum exhibits across the country and around the world. In order to include gender, curators have used many different tactics. Some museum curators choose to create a specific segment of the exhibit devoted to discussing women and their roles in history. Other museum curators are making an effort to incorporate women into existing exhibits; some have even decided to create all new exhibits.

Museums, by nature, tend to take different approaches in achieving the same goal: to educate the public. Analysis is the best way to learn how a museum succeeds (or fails) at representing gender. By looking at exhibits from six Jewish museums in the United States, it will become clear how each museum has a different approach to the way they represent Jews, both past and present.

The National Museum of American Jewish History

The National Museum of American Jewish History exemplifies the goal of educating the public with their recent restructuring of their exhibits and building. They currently do not have a special exhibit on women; instead, fine-grained attention to gender is embedded into its main exhibit. Members of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania founded the museum in 1976.³⁷ The museum was originally located in the same building as their synagogue until 2010,

³⁷ NMAJH, "History of NMAJH," *About*, <http://www.nmajh.org/History/>

when they opened their current location on Independence Mall.³⁸ The core exhibit covers three floors of the museum and is organized chronologically. Visitors begin on the fourth floor with “Foundations of Freedom: 1654-1880.” Beginning with Jews who came to America during the colonial period, this section focuses on how Jews created and thrived in their own communities in this new land. Next, visitors explore Floor Three and its section “Dreams of Freedom: 1880-1945.” This section gives the story of the mass immigration of Jews to America and how they shaped American Jewish community and culture. The section ends with a discussion about Jews and their experience during World War II. The core exhibit ends of the second floor with “Choices and Challenges of Freedom: 1945-Today.” This last section talks about how Jews dealt with the creation of the state of Israel and the influx of non- European Jewish immigrants to the United States.³⁹ These three floors give the visitor an understanding of the main trajectory of American Jewish history.

Overall the core exhibit in this museum gives visitors a view of how both Jewish men and women assimilated into American culture while still retaining their heritage. However, women are not at the forefront of the curator’s mind and this is reflected in the exhibit. We can see an example of this on the fourth floor, “Foundations of Freedom: 1654-1880.” This section begins with a discussion of Jews who came during the colonial era. The focus of this section is Asser Levy and the Franks family. There is an estate ledger belonging to Asser Levy on display along

³⁸ Jon Hurdle. "Alongside the History of the Nation, the Story of Jewish Immigrants." *The New York Times*, January 12, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/12/us/12religion.html>.

³⁹ "Core Exhibition," National Museum of American Jewish History, <http://www.nmajh.org/coreexhibition/>.

with a plaque discussing his life in America. Next to this display is a family tree with the title “First Families: Family Tree of the Franks Family.” The tree uses portraits to show how this family grew throughout their years in America. In the vicinity of the photos exists elaboration on the lives of some of the men portrayed. Notably missing, however, are detailed descriptions of the women shown on the tree.

It is tempting to suggest that this lack of descriptions for the women family members is a consequence of little information being available. However further research squelches this hypothesis. Abigail Franks, one of the women shown, was particularly well documented for a Jewish woman in America during this time period. Abigail Franks is well known due to her letters, which are held at the American Jewish Historical Society. These letters contribute a great deal to understanding Jews in colonial American society. In these letters, Abigail discusses all types of issues, all having to do with how her Judaism affected her life and the life of her family members in this new land. It is important to note that the exhibit included a plaque about Abigail and her letters. The plaque is located in a small corner, overshadowed by a display on synagogues. This display was a missed opportunity to show how this female figure and her objects are a key piece of history. Abigail and her letters give an understanding of Jewish life in the first settlements in America, for both men and for women. Instead, the museum chose to use Asser Levy and his story as the main focus for the visitor’s understanding of the Jewish colonial experience.

The museum missed a valuable opportunity to juxtapose the lives of women with the lives of men. Where the curators could have fostered a personal connection with their audience, they instead overlooked the female demographic. While this

exhibit succeeded in educating its audience on male Jewish life, there remains a glaring omission of the lives of half the population. In order to fully represent society, museums should highlight the experiences of both men and women. When a full picture is given to the visitor, the museum can have a much larger impact on the visitors.

Women are more abundantly represented in later parts of this floor. This is seen through the focus on two women: Rebecca Gratz and Fanny Brooks. Rebecca Gratz was a Jewish woman who was a major player in the philanthropy of nineteenth century Philadelphia. There is a large glass display that showcases all types of objects that relate to Rebecca Gratz, from clothing to pictures to furniture. The artifacts in the display are not all representative of Gratz's gender; some museums make the error of including only dresses, hair brushes and the like, but here visitors can see Gratz's other personal effects: a chair, a desk and a notebook. These objects show Gratz as a person who is more than just a female counterpart to a man and because of this, the exhibit is a richer representation of the past. The same sort of attention to detail would have helped the previous section evoke greater empathy from patrons. By expanding the viewpoints presented, the museum can be considered a better reflection of society.

In a discussion of the movement toward the West, there is a room dedicated to Fanny Brooks. The area tells the story of Fanny and her family who went West in search of a better life (with the promises of gold and land) like many Americans during the 1800's. The room is part of the section entitled "Coming to America," which focuses on Jews and their role in the Western Expansion. The room is geared

toward engaging children in the museum. It is a prime example of how the museum plans to educate youth about Jewish history. The colors in the room are bright and there is a reading of a journal by Fanny's daughter Eveline, which includes sound effects of animals, wagons, and people. The room is filled with activities for children such as dress-up. An interesting part of this room is that the exhibit focuses on the experience of Jews moving west, not the experience of a Jewish girl moving to the American west. This subtle difference seems to embody the museum's point of view on gender and its role in American Jewish history. Both men's and women's experiences are represented in the museum. Instead of focusing on how gender impacts their experiences, the museum demonstrates how their stories help give an overall sense of Jewish history. The stories presented how any experience can be used to help give the visitor a deeper understanding of Jewish history in America. Visitors, both male and female, gain a stronger understanding of how both genders experienced the hardships of westward expansion.

The fourth floor ends with an exhibit entitled "Choices and Challenges." This display explains how Jews tried to emulate their gentile neighbors in their quest to become accepted by general American society. The main way this goal of becoming American is achieved is through the discussion of Purim Balls. Jews wanted to show their success like any other American at the turn of the twentieth century and being involved in charity work was a clear sign of success in American society. The room has lots of items on display, such as programs, photographs, and clothing. There are also masks for visitors to try on and the museum invites visitors to dance along with the people in a video that is displayed on a wall. At first glance, this room seems

balanced in terms of its display of men and women and their involvement in these charity balls. However, a closer look shows that women are the focus of this area. Not only are women the main subject of this room, but they are also portrayed in gendered terms. For example, women are mentioned in relation to their husbands and about a woman's concerns with the way they dressed rather than their role in organizing and fundraising for these balls. It is difficult to lambaste this museum. While the museum comes up short in offering a personable and humanistic female perspective, the curators clearly are attempting to pay attention to the role of women in Jewish history. Their shortcomings, however, help to bolster the notion that a museum's effectiveness exists on a spectrum. Not all museums take such an integrated approach to dissecting gender and its role in Jewish history.

National Museum of American Jewish Military History

The National Museum of American Jewish Military History is one museum that has tried to incorporate women into their exhibits. It was chartered by an act of Congress in 1958 with the purpose of documenting and preserving the contribution Jewish Americans have made to the United States through the armed services.⁴⁰ This museum has both a general exhibit about Jews in the American military and a specific exhibit on women in service. The special exhibit "Women in the Military: A Jewish Perspective" (which is now a permanent part of the museum) serves as the museum's main attempt to tackle gender. The exhibit opened with a general summary about

⁴⁰ "Our History," National Museum of American Jewish History, <http://www.nmajmh.org/aboutUs/ourHistory.php>

women in the military since the birth of the United States. The first part of this exhibit focuses on women who were members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), the Women's Army Corps (WAC), and the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES).⁴¹ Then the exhibit explains how these service women were trained and what kinds of jobs they participated in as part of the armed forces throughout history and up to the present day. The exhibit showed the massive presence of Jewish women in the United States military. Through this special museum exhibit one could see large numbers of women of the twentieth century volunteering to help in the war efforts. Some of these women were working in traditional gendered roles such as secretaries and nurses, but some were also trained to perform other duties. The museum makes special effort to focus on female pilots and mechanics. What makes this exhibit truly Jewish in nature were the stories and personal belongings of women who served in the US military. The visitors learn how their religion and their belief in Judaism is key to these women's identity.

One display case shows all types of artifacts: photographs, letters, books, etc. In the center of the glass display case is a plaque that describes the women who donated these items. The most striking part of this description is the focus of the story about two sisters, Sadie and Sue Ann Grossman. Rather than discussing what these women did during World War II, the bulk of the plaque describes their lives after their military service. After the war the Grossman sisters opened their own children's clothing store thanks to a G.I. Loan. This plaque was a missed opportunity to give the

⁴¹ "Women in the Military: A Jewish Perspective." The National Museum of American Jewish Military History. 1811 R Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009. 20 March 2013.

visitor an understanding of the artifacts. By focusing on Sadie and Sue Ann Grossman's lives outside of the military, the museum gives the visitor the impression that their lives in the military were not significant. A full overview of their service would give the visitor a better understanding of the role of women in the past. It is this very anomaly that could have proved so powerful for a female audience and elevated the exhibit to give a full understanding of women's role in the United States armed forces.

The main exhibit, entitled "Hidden Treasures," located in the basement, focuses almost exclusively on men and their experiences in the United States military. Through all the artifacts and plaques, the visitor learns how men experience life in the military. The museum states in their brochure that the items in the display change frequently. One way to include women in the main exhibit would be to incorporate many of the artifacts from the special exhibit into this permanent display. By showcasing the experiences of men and women side by side, the visitor can gain a better understanding of the military experience.

There was one section of the main exhibit that did discuss women and their experiences. "A Mother's Grief," the story of Sanford L. Kahan and his mother Aaron (Minna) Kahan, is told through letters, pictures, and other memorabilia. Sanford Kahan died in the line of duty on July 11, 1944, in Normandy; he was only nineteen years old. The display cases in this section show how his mother dealt with the loss of her son. The museum uses this one story to represent "the thousands of

American mothers who have lost their sons (and daughters) to the horrors of war.”⁴²

This small section on a mother’s tale is meant to represent all women who have lost their children in war. In this way, not only women, but the relationships between women and men are explored. The segregated approach this museum took to discussing women in Jewish history was effective at both educating patrons and attempting to draw them in emotionally. Perhaps though, a segregated and an integrated approach hierarchically: the museum would have been even more effective had it integrated its fidelity to Jewish women throughout its other exhibits.

The Jewish Museum

Some museums do not address gender at all in their exhibits. The Jewish Museum in New York City is the most well known Jewish museum in the United States and around the world. It was founded in 1904 when Judge Mayer Sulzberger donated twenty-six objects to the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. The museum claims to be the first Jewish museum in the United States and the largest to this day.⁴³ The mission of the museum is to use its collection, exhibits, and programs for the “enjoyment, understanding, and preservation of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Jewish people...”⁴⁴ Through the core exhibit, the museum achieves their goal. However, in this process they focus on Jews as a group rather than on the

⁴² "A Mother's Grief," The National Museum of American Jewish Military History, <http://www.nmajmh.org/exhibitions/mothersGrief.php>

⁴³ Jewish Museum et al., *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum* (New York; New Haven: Jewish Museum; Yale University Press, 2004) 11.

⁴⁴ "Mission," The Jewish Museum, <http://www.thejewishmuseum.org/Mission>

story of the individuals; this leads to a lack of a female voice since the public is thought about in terms of men or the male voice. Curators need to break from this idea of the public as male in order to create exhibits that effectively reflect society.

The core exhibit of the Jewish Museum is a prime example of what happens when curators leave out gender. This main exhibit is entitled “Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey,” and this exhibit has had many changes over the years.

Originally opened in 1993, the museum was redesigned and reopened in 2003.⁴⁵

There are three main sections within the exhibit that each deals with a certain period of time. Before entering the exhibit, the visitor is given an introduction to the subject of the Jewish people through a large plaque that asks the question, “How has Judaism been able to thrive?” In this introductory section, the museum sets up three catalysts: 1. Constant questioning and reinterpretation of tradition; 2. Interaction with non-Jews; and 3. The impact of historical events. These themes resonate throughout the exhibit. The museum claims that these three catalysts enabled the Jewish people to survive.

“Forging an Identity: 1200 BCE-640 CE,” the first section of the main exhibit, tells the story of how the Jewish people became a nation and a religious group. This section focuses on the ancient world and how the Israelites started as a nation that governed itself and ultimately became a persecuted minority. The room, which is made to look like the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, describes the roots of the Jewish religion. There is also a discussion about what happened to the Israelites after they were exiled from Israel. One display entitled “The Diaspora” talks about Jews around the world and how they survived and thrived. Objects such as burial plaques, coins,

⁴⁵ Jewish Museum et al., *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*, 16.

and jugs give a sense of how Jews lived in the ancient world. This section also talks about the importance of Torah and other religious texts to the Jewish people. The objects are decidedly genderless to the degree that perhaps the museum was attempting to avoid anything contentious.

The next section in the main exhibit is entitled “Interpreting a Tradition: 640-1800”. The visitor begins to gain a sense of the Jewish community and how it functions. Three main groups of Jews are discussed in this section: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Edot-Ha-Mizrah. Objects from the synagogue as well as the home tell a story. There are displays about the Jewish holidays such as Shabbat, as well as life cycle events, from circumcision to death rights. The museum focuses on both the ritual and artistic value of each object on display. The visitor also learns about the historical context of the object. The objects, though, are displayed without any grounding in personal connection through story or facts. Not only does this museum fail to engage women on a personal level, it fails to engage men. The objects are impersonal artistic pieces; they lack any human context.

The last part of the main exhibit talks about the modern era. “Confronting Modernity: 1700-1948” focuses on emancipation, enlightenment, and the creation of the State of Israel. In the modern world, Jews faced significantly more acceptance, but at the same time were still confronted with anti-Semitism. Through education, Jews were able to become equals with their Christian counterparts. The Jewish Museum succeeds in telling the overall story of how the Jewish people survived and thrived.

The Jewish Museum is an example of the “object-centered” museum. The curators focus almost exclusively on the objects at their disposal. The museum believes that through the context of the history of the Jewish people, the museum engages its visitors. However, removing the narrative from the museum experience impacts the way visitors view Jews. There is a lot of pressure for this museum to achieve the goal of representing the Jewish people. While it succeeds at giving an overview of Jewish history, it does not engage the visitor with personal experiences nor does its gender-neutral approach help the visitor “forge an identity.”

The Museum of Jewish Heritage— A Living Memorial to the Holocaust

The Museum of Jewish Heritage— A Living Memorial to the Holocaust shows how individual narrative can be used in telling the story of the Jewish people. The idea for this museum came about when in 1981 Mayor Edward Koch created a task force, which recommended building a museum and memorial to the Holocaust. The museum opened in September of 1997 with the mission of educating visitors about Jewish history before, during, and after the Holocaust within the framework of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Through the core exhibit, the story of the Jewish people is fully told.⁴⁶ This museum provides an excellent example of how curators can create a museum that becomes a reflection of society by giving the visitor a sense of the personal experience. The narrative in conjunction with the objects teach the visitor how the past is key to understanding our society today.

⁴⁶ The Museum of Jewish Heritage— A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, "Museum of Jewish Heritage: About," http://www.mjhnyc.org/about_f.html#UyS1215DGBp.

The main exhibit is divided into three sections. The visitor begins on the first floor with “Jewish Life A Century Ago.” In a large room a video is projected onto the walls. This introduction gives short stories and quotes about Jews and their life throughout human history. The rest of the floor focuses on how Jews lived as individuals as well as a community. Displays about life events, holidays, and education are all included. There is a discussion of Jews not just in Europe, but also around the world. The visitor learns how Jews made a living in all kinds of occupations. Politics is also a topic in this section. Through anti-Semitism, Socialism, and Zionism the museum shows how individual and overall Jewish life was changing by the end of World War I.

The next floor of the museum focuses on the Holocaust. “The War Against the Jews” begins with an introduction to the Nazi rise to power. Going chronologically, the museum shows how anti-Jewish measures intensified into what is historically known as the Holocaust. There is also a small display about children and their experiences during this time. This section focuses on how Jews, both in Europe and around the world, were able to survive this tragedy. The last floor, “Jewish Renewal,” discusses how Jews thrived after the Holocaust. Jews around the world were able to become the strong people they are today through the establishment of the State of Israel, help from the United States and social justice. The exhibit ends with a discussion on religion and its changing notions in today’s society.

The Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust succeeds in its goal of telling the story of the Jewish people through the lens of the Holocaust. The floors are broken up into three groups: before the Holocaust, the

Holocaust, and after the Holocaust. The museum wants the focus to be on how much was lost and learned due to this tragedy. This exhibit focuses on the general Jewish experience while at the same time using personal stories to engage the visitor.

The main exhibit begins with a video that discusses gender and Judaism. At one point in the film, people discuss how they identify with their Judaism. One woman describes a conversation with her daughter about writing and being Jewish. According to her mother, the daughter said, “I can’t write about why I am a Jew because it is like asking why I am a girl.” This is a very powerful statement. For her to say that her identity is her gender is a powerful juxtaposition. She is suggesting that her gender and her Judaism are both so inexplicably central to her sense of self that she lacks the ability to describe them; that is to say, to define it would mean concretely defining herself. Judaism in today’s society has become not only a religion, but also an ethnicity and a sense of heritage for many people. This quote sets the tone for the rest of the exhibit. The idea of Judaism as both a religion and an ethnicity is a key point of this museum.

The first section of the main exhibit demonstrates Jewish family life. Women are a part of the discussion in every life event from birth to death. The holidays and life events are set up in terms of a family unit. The visitor is able to gain a full sense of Jewish history because the exhibit gives them an understanding of how both men and women experience Judaism. For example, when discussing circumcision (known in Hebrew as a *brit milah*), the museum includes a circumcision cloth and describes how the mother would make the cloth and her presence at the ceremony. Women are actors in their own life events as well. When discussing the wedding, the museum

displays the role of both men and women in the ceremony. By including women in the conversation, the museum shows that they have an active role in the community.

When discussing the Holocaust on the second floor, women are included in the overall narrative. The Holocaust in many museums usually becomes a discussion of the masses as well as the individual. However, it can be hard to find the female voice among the masses, as discussed by James Young. All of the displays on this floor attempt to include women, men, and children as part of the story of the Holocaust. An example of this can be seen in one display. Esther Srul was killed on September 9, 1942. Before she died in Kovel, Poland, Esther inscribed her synagogue with a description of how the community was forced out from the synagogue and killed. Her story gives the visitor a sense of how women and their experiences are integrated into the general story of the Holocaust.

Women are a part of the modern era of the museum exhibit as well. There is a display about how Judaism as a religion changed in the United States after World War II: “Women play an increasingly active role in almost all branches of Judaism. The bat mitzvah ceremony... is now nearly as common as the bar mitzvah for boys. In 1972 the Hebrew Union College ordained the first woman rabbi. Some movements have embraced gender neutral [sic] texts...” Women are shown as a separate group deserving their own place in Judaism and its rituals. Instead of integrating women into the overall portrayal of Judaism after World War II, the curators decide to dedicate a special section to gender issues. There are many debates about how to include women in museum exhibits. One way is to dedicate a section to gender as seen in this section on the modern era. The museum also incorporates women into

the exhibit by putting men's and women's experiences side by side. Both of these techniques give the visitor a sense that society views gender on equal terms.

The Tenement Museum

The Tenement Museum is a unique place to learn about Jewish history. Historians Ruth Abram and Anita Jacobson founded the museum in 1988. Although it is not officially a Jewish museum, the institution does give tours that focus on Jews who lived in these apartments. The tour "Hard Times" focuses on two immigrant families who, through their hardships, were able to thrive in America. The Gumpertz and the Baldizzi families teach the visitor how these immigrants survived the Panic of 1873 and the Great Depression of the 1930's. This hour-long tour was facilitated by a guide named Maria. It began with an introduction to the history of the tenement building. Learning about when it was built, how many families lived in the building, and other background information helped give the visitor context into understanding the rest of the tour.

Although the tour focused on two families, only one of these families was Jewish. Natalie Gumpertz was a Jewish-German immigrant who came to America in the 1870s. In the kitchen, Maria talks about how the family had troubles. The family was suffering during this time since Julius, Natalie's husband, lost his job in 1873. Natalie does everything she can to help out through odd jobs doing laundry and childcare. However, the real problems occur for the family in 1874. Natalie's fourth child Isaac was born and later that year Julius left the family and never came back.

This meant that Natalie needed to be self-sufficient in a time when women heavily relied on the men in their lives for support, especially in terms of finances.

This part of Natalie's life gives the museum visitor a good understanding of immigrant women in New York during the 1800's. Rather than just talking about how the kitchen was the women's domain for cooking and cleaning, the kitchen becomes the center of life for this family. It is a place where Natalie does her work doing laundry and taking care of children and where Natalie and Julius discuss their options. The kitchen becomes more than just the domestic domain; it is now the heartbeat of the home.

Like all new immigrants to the United States, money is an issue for Natalie Gumpertz. Maria, the tour guide, took us into the front room to talk about the next stage in Natalie's life. Since her husband left, Natalie became the sole breadwinner in the family. At first, she looks for help from the local synagogue and other charities, but no one was able to help. Eventually, Natalie is able to get a sewing machine from a local Jewish charity. She learned how to use the machine and make dresses for other working women in the neighborhood. Maria, the tour guide, gives the visitor an example of how a woman can be independent in a time when that was very difficult.

Natalie is confronted with a huge decision nine years after her husband disappeared. She learns from a telegram that Julius' father has passed away. Julius stands to inherit six hundred dollars. However, it will be hard for Natalie to receive the money. Since the money is in Julius Gumpertz's name Natalie cannot receive it without getting Julius declared legally dead. At this point in the speech, the tour guide asks the group if they think Natalie should have the money. Most people answer that

she should have the money. Posing this question to the group is important. Visitors need to understand how gender issues, politics, laws, and history all intersect. This question helps give the visitor historical context to understand the difference between society then and society today.

In the end, Natalie receives the money and moves to the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The tour guide discusses Natalie's death in 1894, including the fact that she left her children one thousand dollars. This section of the tour ends with a discussion about other historical moments during Natalie's lifetime and after her death, such as the Women's Liberation movement and The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911. The tour group also learned more about the Gumpertz family in the present day.

The tour continued with the story of another family, the Baldizzi's, who lived in the tenement during the Great Depression. This family was not Jewish, but the tour focused on the matriarch of the family, Rosa Baldizzi. One of the important parts to note about this section of the tour is that the tour guide leads a discussion about oral history. The group, as well as the tour guide, concluded that oral history is useful, but can be very unreliable; it should not be used as the only source of information. It is ironic that this discussion occurs in a museum that relies heavily on oral history. This discussion shows that the museum is aware of its shortcomings, but understands that stories are a key way to engage the public in the past.

The Tenement Museum, specifically the Hard Times Tour, tells the story of immigrants in the United States during the mass immigration of the late 1800s and early 1900s. The Hard Times Tour gives the visitor a well-rounded sense of how

immigrants both succeeded and failed in their new lives in the United States. This tour uses women as a way to represent a large group. By telling the stories of Natalie Gumpertz, Rosa Baldizzi, and their families, the visitor gains a full sense of how both men and women interacted in society.

The Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage

An example of the “community” museum model can be seen at the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage. Opened in 2005, this Cleveland, Ohio museum was established “to build bridges of tolerance and understanding by sharing Jewish heritage through the lens of the American experience.”⁴⁷ The museum’s core exhibit focuses on Jews in the Cleveland region from the first settlements up to the present day. There is also had an exhibit of Jewish art on loan from a local synagogue. This museum gives the visitor an understanding of how small local Jewish museums deal with their heritage. The community takes special care to show the history of their neighborhood through the lens of the family unit. This focus on family can be seen in all exhibits in the museum. On display from March 19 to June 9 2013, there was a special traveling exhibit from Yad Vashem on display entitled “Spots of Light: To Be a Woman in the Holocaust.”

“Spots of Light: To Be a Woman in the Holocaust” was aimed at helping visitors understand women and their experiences during the Holocaust. The exhibit begins with profiling courageous women who helped save Jews during World War II. These women have been honored by Yad Vashem as “Righteous Among the

⁴⁷ Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage, “Mission Statement,” *About*, <http://www.maltzmuseum.org/about/mission-statement/>

Nations,” an honorary title used by the state of Israel to describe people who saved Jews from the Nazis. After reading about these women, one enters a large open room. In the center multiple artifacts, such as clothing and letters are on display. Projected on the walls of the room are “large-scale video-art like installations that depict the stories of forty-five women through ten thematic sections: love, motherhood, caring for others, womanhood, partisans and underground, everyday life, friendship, faith, food, and arts.” This exhibit wants visitors to understand how a woman’s multifaceted experience of the Holocaust was different than their male counterparts.

The exhibit was narrative-based and made it very easy for the visitor to connect to these women; stories are key to engaging visitors in learning. Many of the artifacts on display show how a woman’s experience was difficult. For example, a bra from one of the glass cases was accompanied by a description that the material for the bra was traded for two days worth of bread. The fact that this woman felt such a need to feel normal that she would trade two days worth of food for the ability to make a bra is a powerful statement. These women were students, wives, mothers, and workers thrust into horrible situations. They demonstrated such strength and determination to survive and would band together to help each other achieve this goal.

On one of the walls of the exhibit and in a pamphlet given out to visitors, there was an essay written by the curator describing the motivations and goals for this exhibit. It is striking that women and men are described differently in terms for their caring of others during this horrific moment in time. Women are described as motherly and matronly, that they are biologically created to care for others; it comes

to them as second nature. Men, in contrast, are usually seen as becoming “comrades in times of war and are described as courageous or heroic for putting the welfare of their buddies in front of their own. They are never described as acting fatherly in becoming responsible for others. Although highlighting women in their own exhibit is a worthy thought, it seems that in the end bias will still be evident and women cannot be brought thoroughly into the general narrative of history.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Museums are repositories of our past. They are charged to preserve the artifacts and knowledge of our history. Although museums vary in type and format, they share the mission to educate the public about our history, but are expected to do so through the lens of our current societal mores and values. Although the artifacts do not change through the years, how they are presented needs to change in order to keep pace with current cultural norms. This responsibility cannot be ignored because the museum's mission of education is closely tied to how individuals in our society develop their own sense of identity. Inspiring women to be more and do more for their communities is not what we typically think of as a museum's responsibility, but nonetheless curators and administrators of museums must recognize and seriously accept this challenge. Otherwise, museums will be seen as outdated.

The museums discussed in this paper portray different ways of understanding gender in the context of Jewish history as well as the present day. The National Museum of American Jewish History gives the visitor a view of women in America's past. Using special displays, the museum shows how gender is a part of the past.

Another museum that uses this tactic is the National Museum of American Jewish Military History. By creating exhibits that focus solely on women in the military or on how women are impacted by their male family members in the military, the museum incorporates gender into its viewpoint.

The Jewish Museum in New York City focuses on art in Judaism rather than on the history of the people. However, the museum uses a historical timeline to frame the artwork from the collection. The museum values the art more than a sense of

narrative. By focusing on art instead of history, the museum sees no reason to include gender as a factor in its exhibit. The visitor gains a sense of how Jews as a group thrived throughout history rather than through a individual point of view.

The Museum of Jewish Heritage— A Living Memorial to the Holocaust gives the visitor a sense of how narrative becomes important when discussing the history of the Jewish people. Through its core exhibit, the museum fulfills its goal of telling a story of the Jewish people. (There is a focus on the Holocaust as a major catalyst, which reduces the impact of the exhibits before and after this floor.) The museum gives the visitor a good sense of how both men and women experienced being Jewish throughout history. Women are a part of the conversation instead of being included through a separate display. What all of these museums have in common is that when they accurately portraying gender, it only serves to make them more effective; each museum would benefit by paying more attention to gender. If the curators choose to not consider gender in the museum, they are doing a disservice to the visitors.

Focusing on changing the way major museums portray women is a good start, but in order to reach the masses, small community museums must also focus on women and their role in Jewish History. The Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage is focused on its commitment to the Jewish community locally. Through special exhibits, such as the one provided by Yad Vashem, visitors learn about all the ways in which women are included in Jewish History. Giving small communities and their museums exhibits such as “Spots of Light: To Be A Woman in the Holocaust” is key to expanding the way visitors view women in the past. The more people who see these types of exhibits (that show women as actors in history), the more society can

learn and grow.

It is interesting how all of these museums focus on the role of Jews in the history of the world and yet they each have their own approach. This can best be seen through a comparison of the two museums that had exhibits that focused on the Holocaust: The Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage and The Museum of Jewish Heritage— A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. Both tackle how the Holocaust impacts Jews around the world. What differs between these two museums is how the curators decided to approach the subject.

The Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage showcased a traveling exhibit that focused exclusively on women and their experiences in the Holocaust. The curator states in the brochure that the goal of the exhibit “is not to describe what the Nazis and their accomplices did to women. Instead, we emphasize the response and actions of Jewish women to the situations they faced.”⁴⁸ This focus on showing how women are actors in their own lives rather than passive viewers is key.

In contrast, The Museum of Jewish Heritage— A Living Memorial to the Holocaust focuses on the general experience of Jews during the Holocaust. Although the visitor does gain a sense of how both men and women lived (and died) through this historical event, the focus is on the group experience. There are personal stories throughout the exhibit and they clearly give the visitor a glimpse of the Jews in Europe during the Holocaust. This approach gives the visitor a well-rounded sense of how both men and women experienced this event. Both The Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage and The Museum of Jewish Heritage— A Living Memorial to the Holocaust

⁴⁸ Yehudit Inbar, "Curator's Statement," in *Spots of Light: To be a Woman in the Holocaust*, (2013).

tell the story of the Jewish experience in the Holocaust. They differ in their approach to the subject. Understanding the goal the curator is key to analyzing an exhibit.

Jewish museums are no stranger to understanding how they reflect society and its viewpoints. Exhibits can be hot topics in the community, such as the case of the “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art” at the Jewish Museum in New York City. Jews see themselves as a small community that must protect itself and its image. This exhibit threatened the idea that Jews see the Holocaust as something sacred and should never be questioned. This moment of crisis is a prime example of the function of the museum as a reflection of society.

Museums are a key part of the way our society learns about the past and interprets the future. The representation of women in museums today has become a litmus test. Understanding how women are shown in an exhibit is a reflection of how society views women. Inclusion has become a large part of the museum world today. A prime example of this sense of inclusion is the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Museums representing Native- Americans, African Americans, and Asians through art and other objects. Our society values diversity and embraces differences. Jewish museums are no exception and must embrace this obligation. Women are a central part of history and without their voice, society and its understanding of history would suffer.

All of these museums succeed in giving the visitor a reflection of society. What makes these museums unique is the way the curators approach the subject of gender. Women have not always been a part of the museum exhibit. Throughout the years they have been sewn back into history. However, how they are incorporated

varies. Some scholars believe that museum exhibits should be overhauled and incorporate women in the overall message. Others understand the financial burden this would put on the museum and instead favor including women in special displays. They all have the same goal in mind. Since our society now includes women as part of the overall fabric of our history and everyday life, so to must the museum. Since the museum is a reflection of society, it must adapt when the global viewpoint changes.

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